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CIVIL LIBERTIES

Group formed to counterbalance religious right's political activism

Citizens Project to fight censorship, intolerance

By Warren Epstein/Gazette Telegraph

Attorney Doug Triggs and TV programming consultant Amy Divine read with growing frustration all the news stories about religious-based political activism in the Pikes Peak region:

In December, Christian parents complained about self-esteem storybooks in Pioneer Elementary School and the books were removed from the shelves.

In February, other parents objected to their children studying Greek mythology at Woodland Park High and later sued to force the school to teach Bible-based morality.

In April, "concerned Christians" complained about gay and pagan panelists at a District 11 high school diversity conference, prompting officials to cut them from the program.

"All this was happening, and we and everyone we knew were astounded," Divine said. "One of the most disturbing things is that there didn't seem to be a voice of opposition."

So the husband-and-wife team formed the Citizens Project, a group that addresses civil-liberties concerns and monitors the religious right.

They say it will be similar to the Mainstream Voters Project, a group formed to keep checks on a growing religious-based political movement in San Diego. But rather than focusing exclusively on political races, the Citizens Project will look at school curriculums, constitutional issues, anti-gay rights activities, and what its members see as a growing religious intolerance.

Since Divine and Triggs started publicizing the group by word of mouth in May, they have compiled a mailing list of nearly 1,000 names and enlisted 70 volunteers.

"It's taken on a life of it's own," Divine said. "We get about two messages a day from people saying, 'I think this is great.' It's gratifying to see that kind of support out there."

Guy McCready, a lawyer for Cowboys for Christ — the group behind the Greek mythology flap in Woodland Park — said he welcomes the Citizens Project.

"I'm glad to see this group forming," he said. "I think the debate is good."

Divine and Triggs mailed their first newsletter, called "Freedom Watch," earlier this week. It outlined the group's mission, and warned of tactics that have been used by the religious right in San Diego.

The newsletter featured reprinted stories from the San Francisco Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times on the emergence of "stealth candidates" in San Diego — politicians or potential school board members who downplay or hide their religious agendas until elected.

During a meeting Tuesday in Triggs' and Divine's living room, 20 Citizens Project members — a mix of Democrats, Republicans and independents — speculated on the possibilities of local stealth candidates, and discussed repositioning the Citizens Project to give it broader appeal.

Citizens/Conflict with Christians downplayed

From B1

One Christian woman said she felt slightly offended by the newsletter's apparent condemnation of "the Christian right," which she believes makes all conservative Christians seem like radicals. Another member suggested that by "avoiding the 'C' word" in future newsletters, Citizens Project could enjoy wider support.

"Well, we're certainly not anti-Christian," Divine said. "Most of our members are Christian."

But the question remained of what to call the political force that the Citizens Project has formed to monitor.

"I know," said homemaker Ellene Shapiro. "You could just call them the tolerance impaired."

It took more than a minute for the laughter to subside.

The Citizens Project is in the process of incorporating as an official nonprofit organization, which would give it tax breaks and discount mailing rates.

Board members include: Triggs, an attorney specializing in bankruptcy law; Divine, who helped launch Vision Network, a New York-based multi-faith religious cable network; Lt. Col. Dave Porter, head of behavioral sciences at the Air Force Academy; Bruce Loeffler, associate professor of geology and art history at Colorado College; and Richard Skorman, owner of Poor Richard's Restaurant and Poor Richard's Bookstore and director of the Environmental Film Resource Center.

These board members do not necessarily represent the groups they are affiliated with.

(For information on Citizens Project, call 685-9899.)